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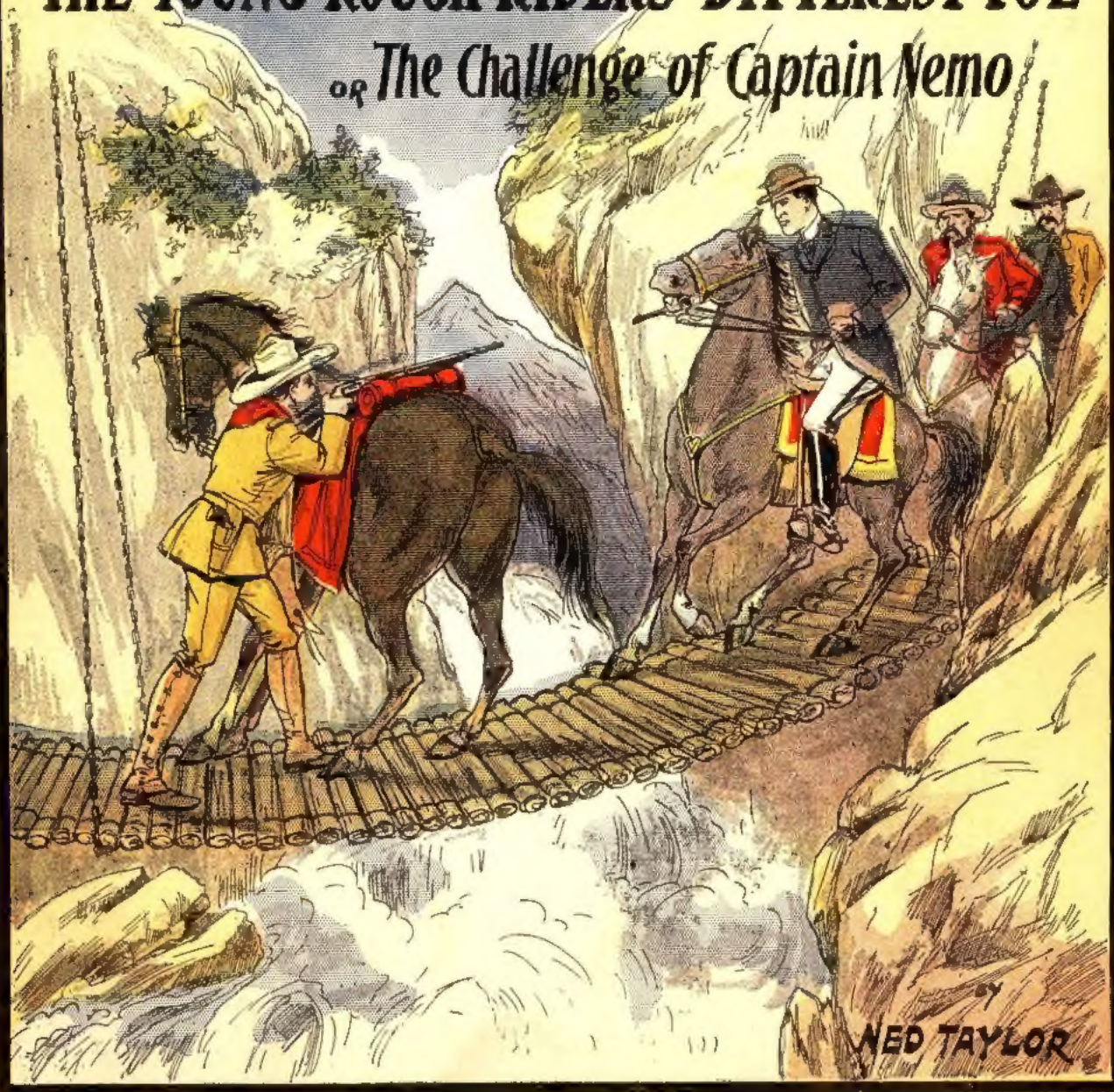
Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

THE YOUNG ROUGH-RIDER'S BITTEREST FOE

OR The Challenge of Captain Nemo



Before the young Rough Rider was half way across the swinging bridge, Captain Nemo and two followers rode down opposite. Ted jumped off his horse and leveled his rifle.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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The Young Rough Rider's Bitterest Foe;

OR,

THE CHALLENGE OF CAPTAIN NEMO.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN IN THE MIRAGE.

The rising sun was throwing long bars of gold across the broad, unfurrowed plain from between two high mountains on the east, which rose like the massive pillars of a mighty gateway in the lofty highlands, as three horsemen, riding single file, came to an abrupt halt.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" exclaimed the one in the rear, "look yonder, boys, if you want to see the pootiest sight yer ever clap eyes on."

"It's the town for sure," said he, riding in the center of the little cavalcade.

"Skittymount, shore's thunder," supplemented the first speaker. "Whoop her up, boys! we'll get there in the shake o' a goat's tail."

"Shortest twenty miles I ever rode," declared the second.

"Shore, Ben. We ain't been out from camp more'n ten minnits, and the lazy pace we've rid don't mean more'n two miles. Jumpin' sandhills! as good as eighteen miles lopped off at one clip o' the eyes."

"Did you ever hear of old Dave Crockett?" asked the third and younger member of the party, his lips parting with a smile, displaying two rows of pearl-white teeth between.

"Shore, captain. He led Fremont 'cross the plains, and got snarled up the wussest kind among the 'Rapahos."

"Off your base again, Bud. Showing such ignorance in regard to the author, the effect of what I was about to quote from him is lost upon you."

"P'r'aps Ben here can 'preciate it," said the crestfallen rider.

The next moment his exuberance of spirits overcame his momentary disappointment, and he shouted, while he swung his cap high in the air:

"There she looms, plainer'n ever. Jumpin' sandhills! I b'lieve she's comin' right down to us."

"Well it might, Bud, for that is no real town."

"No real town?" asked his companions, in the same breath.

"As true as you are sitting here, lads. When you said 'loom,' Bud, you spoke nearer the truth than you realized. That is a phantom town."

"A what?" asked the one called Bud.

"A make-believe town?" asked the third, lifting his big body lazily upward so that he might get a better view of the strange sight.

"It is only a mirage," declared the foremost. "It may be the picture of Skittymount thrown by the pencil of the sun upon the walls of space, but the real town is still no nearer than twenty miles."

Bud managed to give expression to his favorite byword, but his larger companion was content to watch more closely than before the singular sight, with an interest equaled only by their leader.

The three riders, mounted upon little Western horses, as sure of foot as the mountain goat, and as swift almost as the prairie wind, presented a striking appearance.

The foremost, and calmest of the trio, was a boy as we measure life by the number of years, and yet with a manliness of form and figure that made him appear older than what he really was.

His perfect figure, both in height and build, was set off with the best effect imaginable by a close-fitting suit, cut in military style, and made of khaki cloth, his trousers met by brown leggins, fitting closely about his ankles.

His waist was girthed about with a broad web belt, from which protruded the butt of a forty-four Colts revolver, and the brass heads of a row of cartridges.

A light, but serviceable, rifle was slung across his shoulder, while a lasso was curled about the horn of his saddle.

His well-shaped head, covered with a wavy mass of fine brown hair, was shielded by a broad sombrero, like his khaki suit, of a deep brown.

This hat he had lifted now so as to get a better view of the distant scene, so his handsome, clear-cut features were plainly revealed in all their wealth of beauty, firmness and good health. It was a countenance the friend would look to for succor and the enemy for punishment.

He sat his saddle as if a part of the plucky little beast beneath him, which now stood patiently awaiting the next wish of its master.

In the country to the east and south he would have needed no introduction, and even in this, to him, new corner of country, not a few, had they been abroad this fair morning, would have hesitated to address him as the chief of the young rough riders, Ted Strong.

Such was, indeed, his name.

The companions beside him were two of his most trusty comrades.

The smaller was none other than Bud Morgan, as boisterous at times as ever, and as brave and faithful always.

If short of figure, and slight, he was as nimble as a fox, more than making up by his suppleness of action what he may seem to have lacked in size. He so far imitated Western style, that his yellow hair fell about his shoulders with a profusion Texas Jack might have envied, or the gallant Custer worn with pride.

As has been remarked, the third of the little party was large of form, and sluggish of movement. His broad shoulders and muscular limbs told of prodigious strength, and the resistless energy of the lion when aroused.

If sleepy and good-natured in appearance, Ben Tremont had won a fame in the Eastern colleges for athletic feats which had preceded him into the West, and stood him in good stead in more tight corners than you could count upon your fingers.

Great, good-hearted Ben was a host in himself, as his young leader knew and often confessed.

This twain, of such difference in bodily make-up, were clad in the same khaki uniform of their chief.

"It does appear to be sort of dwindling away," said Ben, at last.

"Shore's sin and——" began Bud, to be stopped by the young rough rider, who exclaimed with more than common earnestness:

"Look to the left, lads. Just beyond that clump of trees. Do you see anything unusual there?"

His companions lost no time in obeying.

Then, as Bud Morgan turned his gaze upon this new scene, he cried:

"Jumpin' sandhills! there be something wuth ther lookin'."

What the three watched during the next minute was indeed a sight to stir the blood of natures less easily aroused.

Three times Bud lifted his rifle halfway to his shoulders, to lower it the next moment, muttering:

Danged if I know if it can be done or not. Looks like it, and then ag'in it don't."

At the moment Ted Strong had called the attention

of his companions to the new sight, the three saw plainly a couple of persons upon the backs of two stout-limbed horses, riding leisurely in the direction of the town. They could see with sufficient clearness to know, that the one in advance was a man past middle life, with long, flowing beard, and a figure above the medium in height and weight. In fact, the young rough rider saw that he was above the average figure, being fully six feet tall.

He saw, with that keen, quick precision of his, which enabled him to take in an object at a glance, and to fix it indelibly upon his mind, that he was dressed in the fashion of a man from the East, and he judged him to be one of those well-to-do men from that section of the country, who either for pleasure or health was making a trip through the West.

His companion was a woman, and instantly concluding in his own mind that she was a daughter of the other, Ted decided she was both young and beautiful.

Of course this may have been the rapid appreciation of his warm and youthful nature.

Attired in a close-fitting, natty suit, it was certainly no figure of his imagination which convinced him she was of that divine form given to a perfect woman.

The couple were advancing at a moderate gait, as if enjoying their early morning ride, the father turning to speak, ever and anon, to his daughter, whom he must have loved with the devotion of a fond parent.

She, in order to converse more easily with him, spurred her horse forward so as to ride beside him.

Their attention absorbed in each other, neither seemed to discover the approach of a single horseman from their front, he having recently left the border of the clump of trees already mentioned.

At the same time three riders were following them in rapid pursuit, though it was possible the soft grass so muffled the hoof strokes of their animals that their advance was made in comparative silence.

At any rate, it might as well have been as far as catching the attention of the father and daughter.

The young rough rider did not give the pursuing horsemen more than a passing glance, noting that they were such men as were to be found among the settlements of that country.

His gaze had become fixed closely upon the single rider, and his lips moved slightly, as he had begun to give expression to his thoughts, and then relapsed into silence.

As he sat in his saddle, with the ease of one used to riding upon horseback, he showed that his body was of uncommon length, though his lower limbs were short. Though he appeared in a sitting posture to be a man of extraordinary height, this was somewhat compromised by the shortness of his legs.

However, he was a man of good height, strong limbs, and of rather prepossessing appearance. His face was shaven, and his garb that of a man from the East.

Sweeping swiftly, yet silently, toward the unsuspecting couple, the stranger suddenly whipped out a heavy revolver, and held it by his side, continuing to advance with his eyes fixed upon the others.

CHAPTER II.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

Before this time the young rough rider had anticipated the peril of the father and daughter.

He felt confident that the three coming from the rear were allies of the man in front.

Both Ben and Bud had comprehended as much, and a cry of fear trembled upon the lips of the more excitable of the twain.

"Look!" gasped Bud. "He means to shoot shore's——"

Bud Morgan did not finish his sentence.

The stranger was now within pistol shot of his intended victims.

The father was the first to discover him.

He threw up his left hand, as if he would keep him back.

If he spoke, or either uttered any cry, the distant watchers of this terrible pantomime could not know.

They saw the woman abruptly stop, and reach out as if she would clasp the arm of her companion.

The next moment the flash of a revolver shone upon the space.

It had not cleared away before the father was seen to reel in his seat. Then, throwing up his hands, wildly, he toppled toward the ground.

Frightened, no doubt, by the report of the firearm, and the strange action of its rider, the horse reared, plunged and started to run away.

Urging his own horse forward, the slayer of an innocent life attempted to seize the bridle of the animal ridden by the young woman.

If for a moment dazed, bewildered by this unexpected attack, she immediately rallied, and lifting into the air the

riding whip she carried, dealt the murderer a smart blow across the face.

It must have been a stinging blow, for he actually fell back, and seemed about to drop to the earth.

She had wheeled her horse, and was starting in pursuit of the animal which was dragging the body of her poor father away from the ill-fated scene.

Just then the three riders in the rear dashed up.

The foremost caught the rein of the runaway horse, and quickly brought it to a standstill.

The second seized the bridle of the creature ridden by the woman, and stopped that, too.

The slayer of the man now came forward, pressing close beside the hapless girl.

For a little spell the watchers trembled lest he meant to shoot her. But such proved not to be his intentions.

The third of his accomplices, dismounting, quickly bound her in the saddle.

While he was doing this the leader slipped to the ground, and began to rifle the pockets of the dead man.

The entire scene had not occupied more than three minutes, but in that brief period a life had been taken, and the fair daughter made a captive.

The chief of the quartet was now seen to point toward the direction from whence his followers had come.

Then they headed their horses that way, and with the captive in their midst rode away at a furious pace.

After watching them for a few moments, the smooth-faced murderer resumed his search of the dead man's clothing, as if he was bent upon finding something he had not yet seen.

The white face of the poor daughter was turned backward, while she was borne away to a fate worse, no doubt, than that which had so suddenly overtaken her father.

His search over, the man from the East bounded lightly into his saddle, and rode smartly back upon his trail.

This ended the scene.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" exclaimed Bud, "that beats me ter holler, shore."

"Somebody has been foully dealt with," said Ben.

"Not only one, but two," added the young rough rider.

"I don't jess see through it," acknowledged Bud.

"Do either of you recognize the man who shot the other?" asked Ted.

"I thought there was something natural about him, but I am not sure I ever saw him before, nor am I sure of it now, when I come to think of it."

"You say the town we saw so plain was, or is, twenty miles away? How was it about this shooting affair we think we have witnessed?"

"In the same situation. One is as much of an illusion as the other."

"So yer don't believe neither?" asked Bud.

"On the contrary, I believe both. The shooting took place only a short distance out of Skittymount."

"And you think we could see twenty miles away, one man shoot another, and carry off a woman."

"Though the actual scene took place twenty miles, more or less, distant, the reflection of the sun's rays brought it actually within plain distance of us. You saw each feature of the tableau clearly, did you not?"

"Even to the shape of his nose, which I observed had a peculiar twist to it."

"And the mark of that girl's whip across his mug," added Bud.

"Exactly," replied Ted. "It was all plain enough for me to recognize the villain."

"Jumpin' sandhills! who might he be?"

"He might be a better man. As it is, he is Capt. Nemo!"

At the mention of that name both of the others uttered exclamations of mingled surprise and dread.

They had heard it spoken of as that of one of the worst outlaws that had ever infested the country.

"If he is Capt. Nemo, why is he going toward the town?" asked Ben.

"That remains for us to solve. It is certain Capt. Nemo would not go there."

"Then you believe you are wrong in saying he is the outlaw of Black Falls?"

"Oh, no. I am sure he is Capt. Nemo, the blackest scamp that ever drew breath of life, and my most bitter enemy."

"Jumpin' sandhills! yer don't say."

"I knew him in the East," explained Ted. "He committed a crime there in which I detected him, but he escaped the punishment he deserved through the aid of confederates. Then, again, he and I met in Denver, when it was nip and tuck between us for a while, but just as I was getting him where I wanted him he fled. What do you say, boys, to riding over to Skittymount?"

"Will it take us far out of the way to the lower mines, whither we are bound?" asked Ben, showing uncommon interest in the matter.

"None to speak of. But if we run across this Capt.

Nemo, as I half expect we shall, it may give us lively times."

"Whoop, hooray!" shouted Bud, "that's the talk fer me. On to Skittymount, I say."

"Are you sure you have not been mistaken, Ted?" asked the more skeptical Ben. "Wasn't that whole affair an illusion?"

"In a certain sense, yes," acknowledged the young rough rider. "But, on the whole, it was very real. I have heard Jim Butterworth, and Jim was never known to lie when truth would serve him best, that he had been somewhere in this vicinity, and looked on an exact counterpart of Carson City, more than twenty miles away.

"I am just as sure that what we have seen this morning is an exact reproduction of some tragedy which has been enacted in the vicinity of Skittymount. What do you say, boys? We may be losing valuable time."

"On to Skittymount," replied Ben; "even if it takes us into the path of Capt. Nemo."

"I intend it shall, in order to save that poor girl borne off before our eyes to his rendezvous in the mountains."

"Yer ain't tol' us what Dave Crockett said," spoke up Bud.

"He said: 'Be sure you are right, and then go ahead.'"

"Hurrah fer Davy! and here's a pony to take me to Skittymount, an' here's hand fer Cap'en Nemo. 'Be sure yer right, an' then go ahead.' I'm there root hog or bust."

Without further delay the trio resumed their onward course, heading now in the direction they were certain Skittymount was situated in, soon leaving the long, lofty range of highlands which they had mounted a quarter of an hour before, and which ran nearly parallel to that other backbone over which Capt. Nemo had ridden to commit that dastardly crime, which had been witnessed by those so far away.

Between these ridges lay the great sand plains forming the sink of the Carson River, where, after a tortuous journey of nearly two hundred miles, its waters are suddenly drunk by the porous earth, made up of great reed swamps.

CHAPTER III.

LOST TO REASON.

"Lynch him!"

"Run him up!"

"Give him plenty of rope!"

"Let me have hold of the end of it!"

Cries similar to these, varied in many forms of expression as individual thought shaped them, rang on the clear mountain air from a rabble of men lost to reason.

It does seem strange that intelligent man should be so easily turned from what he knows to be the path of common sense into the wild maze of overmastering excitement, when he becomes as untamed as the brute.

The men gathered here just apart from the main street of that stirring town of Skittymount, were no worse than those who help to make the sum and substance of the world's inhabitants.

In a certain sense it was a humane intention which now ran riot in their brain, but such a riot as drove them wild.

A man, though a stranger to most of them, had been murdered in cold blood only a short distance from town, and his pockets rifled of their contents.

The evil-doer, not overwise or overcautious, it would seem, had been discovered by the sheriff of Skittymount only a moment after he had committed the terrible deed.

Ay, it was the boast of that lively town, as well as of himself, that no wrongdoer escaped the swift vengeance of Manton Marks, who had been sheriff of the town now for over a year.

It is true a certain high-handed outlaw, disturber of the peace and sort of all-round desperado, had so far eluded the cunning Marks, but the latter had sworn to bring him down yet, and his oath was believed by the majority to fix the doom of the daring robber.

After seizing the slayer of the gray-headed man, whose name had been given out as John Maxfield, Sheriff Marks had dragged his victim into town, when a crowd was quickly called together.

Straight to the gallows tree of Skittymount was the unwilling prisoner borne, for it was the practice carried out here to deal summary punishment.

This was the policy of Sheriff Marks, and to that it was believed was due the certain sort of peace which had fallen upon Skittymount since he had become its guardian of justice.

The prisoner this time was different from the majority —in fact, unlike nine out of ten who had been taken to this ill-omened spot.

He was a young man, well dressed, who would have passed in any crowd as a respectable citizen, as far as looks were concerned.

He improved every lull in the confusing outcries to declare himself innocent of any crime, and that he had

found the man dead before he had reached the place where he had been stricken down. He even claimed he was a friend to the other, whom he had known in the home where he had come from in the East, for like the other he was an Eastern man.

But his appeals fell upon deaf ears.

Such cries as have been quoted, as some of the more decent ones, made the air hideous with their babel of sounds.

Sheriff Marks, mounted upon his magnificent bay horse, brandishing his Smith & Wesson revolver over his head, did not try to hush the mob.

Such scenes seemed to delight his warlike nature.

His restive steed prancing about, causing the excited spectators to fall back in a hurry wherever he rode, Marks had pointed to the pine whose lightning-riven top gave it the appearance of a spectral tree fitted to such wild deeds as had been committed beneath its branches.

It has been claimed that no number of hangings has ever been performed beneath a tree which did not wither and fall under the blight of death.

It is possible trees have hearts that feel, after all.

What a horrible tale this pine, once a tall, stately monarch of this locality, could have told had its language been understood by men!

Now this young stranger, whose name was unknown to the spectators, was dragged underneath its scarred form, which stood drooping and listless in the still atmosphere of that fair day.

Willing hands fastened about his neck one end of a long rope, fashioning with remarkable skill, considering the clumsiness of the fingers used to hard work, the hangman's noose.

The free end of the line was tossed dexterously over the lower limb of the pine, which had been worn smooth at one place where many another rope had been run in times gone by.

Men who seemed impatient to mingle in the affair caught upon the disengaged cord, and stood in readiness to carry out the order of the sheriff.

This officer, swinging his fiery horse about so as to face the scene, waved his hand, with a look of exultation upon his features, that were not bad-looking except for a deep flesh wound extending across his left cheek.

This had started to bleed afresh, and the blood was trickling down the skin in half a dozen tiny streams.

His words were superfluous, but he evidently found relief from his pent-up feelings by shouting:

"Run him up, boys! We must show the world that Skittymount does not sanction such cold-handed murders as this brute has committed."

"Hangin's too good fer him," some one cried from the mob. "Give him a good fire."

"The rope's more sartin," declared another.

Though the men tugging at the rope did not heed the sounds, at that moment the clatter of horses' hoofs broke upon the scene.

In his excitement and exultation Sheriff Marks did not discover the approach of newcomers upon the scene.

But those of the crowd who were cursing themselves because they had missed getting to the front, and thus having obtained a better view of the taking of a life for a life, now found something else to attract their attention.

The keenest of perception quickly felt that possibly they were about to be close witnesses of something possibly as interesting as the scene in front.

They saw three horsemen bearing down upon them like the wind that swept up at intervals from the salt plain below.

They were coming in single file.

In truth the foremost, mounted upon a noble-looking black horse, was several rods in advance of his nearest companion, while the third was as far behind this second.

The black steed seemed to be hugging the very ground, though his feet scarce touched the earth flung out on either side in clouds of dust by its iron heels. The nostrils were expanded, the head outstretched, the mane and tail streaming in the air, while its dark sides were streaked with foam, showing that it had come far and fast.

Its rider, sitting in his seat with the ease and grace of a born horseman, had dropped the reins upon the horn of his saddle, and was guiding the flying animal by knee pressure.

The wind created by his flight lifting back the wide rim of his sombrero, a youthful countenance was disclosed, fixed and firm set now. His eye was turned fixedly toward the scene under the pine.

He had unslung from his back his rifle, which he held in his hands ready for instant action.

The second of the oncoming riders was of slighter build; the yellow locks flying in the air proved him to be Bud Morgan.

Behind him, both horse and man puffing like a porpoise, came Ben Tremont.

Before this time it is understood that the leader was

the young rough rider, who had ridden twenty miles in a little more than an hour, that he might reach this scene.

With all his haste he had arrived none too soon.

Finding that he showed no disposition to stop outside of the ring formed by them, the spectators retreated with wild cries, while Ted Strong urged his trembling horse into their very midst.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" yelled Bud Morgan, spurring his jaded animal forward in the track of his young leader, "this is what I call cavortin'——"

But Bud did not finish his sentence.

His overworked horse staggered as it followed between the human walls behind the young rough rider, and then, with a gasp almost human in its expression, reeled to and fro.

"Th' critter's goin' to tumble!" cried a bystander.

Bud sprang lightly to the ground, but scarcely quicker than the horse dropped at his feet.

CHAPTER IV.

BIDDING DEFIANCE.

"Hold!" thundered the young rough rider, sweeping the exciting scene with his eagle gaze, addressing the men at the rope.

Already the victim had been lifted from the earth, and his face was fast assuming the ghastly hue belonging to one strangled.

It seemed at first glance that Ted Strong had come too late.

But his sharp command was followed by a yet sharper report of his rifle, and before the would-be hangmen could slacken their hold on the line had they been disposed, it parted where it wound over the branch of the pine with a loud snap.

The unfortunate young man dropped instantly in a heap at the foot of the tree.

The men tugging upon the other end of the rope, suddenly relieved of their burden, went headlong into a heap.

Leaving them to recover themselves as they might, the young rough rider swept the onlookers with his gaze, until his eyes rested upon the stalwart figure of Sheriff Marks.

His lips parted with a smile at sight of this officer, while he said under his breath:

"It is he."

Sheriff Marks quickly recovered his self-possession, which had been slightly rattled at the abrupt appearance of this new horseman.

In a tone of thunder he cried:

"What meddler are you who breaks in upon honest men in this unheard-of manner?"

"The friend of justice," replied Ted, in a clear, ringing tone.

The cries of the crowd had become hushed as he dashed upon the scene, and the spectators now stared upon him in silent wonder.

"Meddler!" shrieked Marks. "Beware how you interfere with the work of justice. You have spoiled the best bit of rope in Skittymount. But it is still long enough for the neck of such an upstart as you."

"I have saved an innocent life."

"You have played into the hands of a murderer. Men, he is an accomplice of the prisoner; seize him."

"The first man who moves falls in his tracks!" cried the deep bass of Ben Tremont, who had urged his overdriven horse close to the side of his leader.

The crowd remained quiet, with wide-opened mouths and ears.

"Fire and furies!" snorted the officer, "how many more are there of them?"

Ben had brought his firearm so as to cover the crowd to the back of the young rough rider, while the latter swept those in front of him.

For the time being the newcomers indeed seemed to be masters of the exciting situation.

Sheriff Marks glowered upon the audacious young stranger, but for the time seemed to have lost his faculty of speech.

He gazed upon the young rough rider in what appeared to be a dazed manner. Twice he lifted his hands to his eyes as if he would brush away something which had come between his vision and the object seated so calmly upon the black horse flecked with foam, and which stood quivering from its recent exertions.

"You know me, Marcus Nemo?" demanded Ted Strong, enjoying the utter amazement of the other.

His words aroused the officer, who exclaimed:

"The young rough rider!"

"At your service, Capt. Nemo."

"Liar!" fairly hissed the sheriff, "I am not the man you claim I am."

"You are," retorted Ted, firmly.

"I challenge you to prove it."

"By the right hand of justice, Marcus Nemo, I will prove it."

"I defy you to do it."

"More than that," went on the young rough rider, "I will prove you guilty of the crime for which you were hanging this young man."

"Fool!" retorted the sheriff.

"I may be a fool, but I will outwit you."

The young rough rider was no boaster, and he showed that he meant every word he said now.

The effect of this brief dialogue upon the crowd, following upon the sudden appearance of these mysterious strangers, was manifested in various ways. Some looked askance at them, but remained silent. Others nodded their heads in approval, but the great majority watched and waited for a cue from Sheriff Marks to guide them in their action.

"Up and at them, men!" cried the latter. "I know them of old as two of the worst bandits that ever infested the country. See they do not escape, and our little exercises this morning will have a treble interest."

It was evident the sheriff had not seen the arrival of Bud Morgan, who, somehow, did not seem to be very active just then, when it would appear as if he was needed most.

As the officer began to utter his bombastic command the spectators appeared as if they were about to obey, but the muzzles of those ominous rifles, in hands that showed they were capable of using them to a purpose, awed them into inactivity.

By this time the young prisoner was beginning to rally, though his limbs were fastened so he could not rise to his feet.

"What is the charge against this young man?" demanded Ted, indicating the captive.

"He killed a man just out of the city this morning."

"An old man riding in company of his daughter?"

Ted saw that the other started at this speech.

"I know nothing of a daughter. But I caught him in the act of rifling the pockets of his victim."

"Then you did not see him kill this man?"

"Why, of course I did."

"I am sorry to be obliged to contradict you, but you did not."

"What do you know about it?"

"I saw the whole affair from the moment you rode upon the scene until you came back from the side——"

"Up and at him, the dog!" fairly yelled the officer. "I never saw anything like this. I, Manton Marks, sheriff of this county, insulted in this outrageous manner! Shoot him, boys, if you can't do anything else. I command it."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" asked Ted, coolly.

The sheriff knew only too well that the slightest movement on his part would sign his doom. Worse than that, he feared the same fate if one of his men should be caught in the act of obeying his own command. Never had he been in a tighter place, when all the conditions, save one, were in his favor.

That condition was the presence of that daring twain, who feared nothing.

He felt confident he had the sympathy of the crowd, almost to a man.

"How did you come by that gash upon your cheek?" demanded Ted.

"I—I got it from the branch of a tree as I rode through the forest this morning," stammered the other. "You will get something worse than that pretty soon if you do not surrender without further parley."

Without relinquishing his "cover" of their leader, the young rough rider addressed the spectators in a loud, authoritative tone:

"Citizens of Skittymount, you have been most wickedly deceived. This man whom you have trusted and elected as your chief officer toward keeping the peace, is the worst enemy you have in the world. He is that infamous outlaw of Black Falls, Capt. Nemo!"

This bold declaration, which the accused attempted to drown with his own words, was received with looks of incredulity.

No doubt there were those present who disliked the sheriff, and were ready to accept the accusation of this youthful stranger at first hand, but they were in the minority, and thus remained silent.

"I should like to know who you are?" said a tall, lantern-jawed man near by.

"I am Ted Strong, the young rough rider. You may have heard of me."

Before any response could be made to this statement on the part of the principal, there was a sharp whirring sound, while a dark object came flying through the air.

For a moment it seemed to quiver over the head of the young rough rider, but before he could dodge its descent it settled about his shoulders, swiftly pinning his arms to his sides.

Then, a furious jerk upon the line snatched him from his seat, and he was pulled to the earth in the twinkling of an eye.

CHAPTER V.

THE CHALLENGE TO A DUEL.

The announcement made by Ted Strong of his identity was robbed of the effect it would otherwise have had by this sudden attack which bound him like a captive.

The lasso had been thrown from behind him, and thus he had not seen the maneuver of the captor until too late.

Ben Tremont had discovered the intention of the lassoer, but his cry of warning to his comrade had come at the same moment of the bold movement, and thus did not save the young rough rider.

Another person had meditated making the same sort of an attack upon Ben, but he suddenly found himself hurled forcibly to the ground, and his rope was dragged in the dust, while a shrill voice cried out:

"Jumpin' sandhills! hyur's a game two can play at. Down with yer homely mug afore I drive it into yer ugly head."

Himself escaping the fate of his leader, Ben Tremont roused himself, and he began to thrash those around him with the fury of a cyclone.

In a moment the giant had cleared a circle, and he had reached the side of Ted before the astonished inhabitants of Skittymount could beat him back.

Never had they seen such an exhibition of skill and strength combined. A single blow from his sledge hammer fist would send an interfering assailant sprawling upon the ground. With eager strength he lifted others from his pathway as if they were babes. But so thick and fast did the aroused men push down upon him, that Ben soon found himself wedged in between living walls, and just as he had reached Ted, he was overpowered.

It seemed as if he must be crushed to a jelly, so furiously did the mob fall upon him.

A minute later both Ted and Ben were securely bound as prisoners.

The cries of Bud heard only a few moments before, as he fought tooth and nail on the edge of the crowd, had now become silent.

From this the young rough rider judged he, too, had been taken a prisoner.

"It looks as if I had blundered," he said to himself, ruefully, while he calmly surveyed his captors, who seemed intent on pulling him limb from limb.

In truth I am not sure but this would have been done, while Sheriff Marks, or Capt. Nemo, looked down from his horse with a triumphant chuckle in his low laugh.

He showed no disposition to check the onsets of the spectators.

"Reckon he won't be quite so bold in fooling round me again," he muttered. "Hello! what's up now?"

In the midst of this exciting scene a newcomer had appeared.

He was a middle-aged man, of stout frame, and a resolute look upon his countenance.

It was Mayor Lummy.

"Stand back there, every one of you," commanded the mayor, pushing his powerful form forward through the crowd.

Reluctantly the men fell back, so as to allow the speaker the privilege of reaching the prisoners.

Sheriff Marks now addressed the mayor, who listened to his brief account of the appearance of the strangers, giving such a color to his story as suited his purpose, of course.

"In my opinion," concluded the sheriff, "the only proper course for us to follow is to string them both up in company with the wretch I captured this morning."

"Such proceedings may do in the case of the murderer," replied Mayor Lummy, "but it can hardly do to hang two men on such slight suspicions as you hold, Marks."

"Slight suspicions!" repeated the officer, with a toss of his head. "I happen to know this precious pair, and a bigger couple of rascals haven't escaped the hemp."

"Who are they, Marks? This one seems more like a boy than a man of the stamp you describe."

"He's old enough to be the very incarnation of deviltry. He's the young rough rider, who has raided more towns than you can shake a stick at in half a day."

"Kept himself pretty busy, then," remarked the mayor, while he continued to look closely at the prisoners. "He doesn't look like such a dyed-in-the-wool enemy of the peace. I never heard the young rough rider spoken of in such terms, though I am quite familiar with his name.

"Let us go slow and safe in this matter, Marks. You may put him in the 'pen,' but he must not be treated to the rope until he has had a fair chance to show himself in his true light."

Sheriff Marks uttered something under his breath only those near him heard, but consented to have Ted and Ben taken to the little stronghold where the inhabitants of Skittymount were wont to place their prisoners awaiting trial.

What became of them after trial is not so certain, for

none of them ever returned here. But that is another story.

The young rough rider and his companions deemed it wise to remain silent, except that the former asked that he be allowed an interview with Mayor Lummy.

He believed the mayor to be a man of honor.

Some of the men, under charge of the mayor, were bearing the prisoners to their jail, when suddenly a great uproar was raised.

This hue and cry was started by the discovery that, in the confusion arising from the appearance of the rough riders, the young man condemned to be hung had disappeared!

The short pieces of rope with which he had been bound were lying on the ground under the pine, but he had vanished.

"The thongs were cut by a sharp knife," declared one, examining the fragments of the ligatures.

"That shows he had help!" cried another.

"Jades and witches!" fairly roared Sheriff Marks, "where have you idiots been? He must not, he shall not, escape. He can't be far off. Hunt him down or some of you shall hang in his stead."

The sheriff urged his horse furiously through the crowd until he was under the pine, as if he was not satisfied with what the others had said.

"It all comes of that infernal Ted Strong. By all the fires that ever burned, he shall never leave Skittymount alive!"

A wild search for the missing man had already been started, but look where they might no trace of the young man could be found.

Had the earth opened and swallowed him up he could not have disappeared more quickly or beyond the finding.

Neither was Bud Morgan to be seen.

Where it had stopped at the end of its long race lay his horse as it had fallen, never to rise again.

The black mare ridden by the young rough rider, and the sorrel which had borne the heavy figure of Ben Tremont to Skittymount, had quietly slipped away, and were now peacefully clipping the short grass a short distance away.

As the search for the missing man grew wider and proportionately hopeless, Sheriff Marks grew more furious in his rage.

Finally he sought an interview with Mayor Lummy, to see if he could not get that worthy's consent to letting the two prisoners hang, in place of him who had flown.

But he found the mayor determined to stand by his first intention, though he did promise that they should be put on trial early in the afternoon.

Then the sheriff resolved to take matters into his own hands, but being careful not to oppose the mayor, whom he feared, though for what reason he could hardly tell.

An hour later the young rough rider, while he sat upon a block in the center of his "pen" thinking upon his situation, and wondering what would follow, he was visited by a coarsely dressed man, of a decidedly unfavorable appearance.

"From the sheriff," he grunted, handing Ted a slip of paper.

This the young rough rider soon found contained a challenege to a duel. It was from Marks, couched in the briefest terms possible.

At first thought Ted was inclined to treat the matter with contempt, unable to comprehend what such a challenge at this time meant.

Ben was confined in a separate apartment, but some prisoner in the past had managed to chip a hole through the log wall, and the big rough rider's eye was glued to this aperture now.

"What is it, Ted?" he asked.

"A challenge to a duel upon horseback from Capt. Nemo."

"With rifles?"

"No, revolvers."

"Don't consider it, Ted."

"I have half a mind to, Ben. It will let me out of this hole, and I am tired of staying here already"

"Well, do as you think best."

"Good! I am in for it."

Turning to the messenger, he said:

"Tell Capt. Nemo I am ready for him whenever he sends for me, only I am to have my own revolvers, which he was so kind as to take away from me a short time since."

The man left the "pen" without a word, when our friends became curious to know how this new twist in affairs was to affect them.

"Capt. Nemo is a dead shot," declared Ben, "and as quick as lightning with the trigger."

"It will be my loss if I am not quicker," replied the young rough rider.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL ON HORSEBACK.

The suspense was of shorter duration than Ted had expected before half a dozen stout men came to escort him out to the single-handed combat.

Sheriff Marks had evidently taken particular pains to spread the news of his anticipated duel with the young rough rider, for it seemed as if every inhabitant of Skittymount had gathered in the clearing just above the prison.

With the coarsely dressed, unkempt men, were many women, and not a few children. These latter showed as much interest as their parents.

Slightly apart from the crowd the sheriff, mounted upon his powerful bay, looked down with cool contempt upon the scene.

The mayor met Ted at the door, saying to him:

"Marks was determined to have his way, and he declared there was a personal consideration to be settled between you and he," said Lummy.

"There is," replied the young rough rider, "and if I have not lost the cunning of my hand this country will soon be rid of one of the worst cutthroats that ever infested it. If I fall, for your own welfare, I want you to remember that that miscreant is none other than Capt. Nemo, your most dreaded enemy."

"I heard you say so before," acknowledged the mayor. "A friend of mine has spoken of you as the soul of honesty, but I do not know what to make of such a statement. I am free to confess that I have my suspicions in regard to the honesty of Marks, as he calls himself. Look sharp to yourself, for he is no mean shot, and he rides the best-trained horse in this country."

"Where is my horse, good Black Bess?"

"Not far away. I thought you might want her, as this is to be a duel on horseback, so I have sent a man to bring her in."

"No stranger can do that," declared Ted. "However, Bess will not fail me."

"How long are you going to dally there?" called out the sheriff from the distance. "I have got other business to look after, and cannot fritter away my valuable time upon this little affair."

"Where are my revolvers and belt?" demanded the young rough rider. "My time, too, is valuable. My duty is to look after the safety of that young lady carried off by the miscreants of this Capt. Nemo."

The sheriff scowled, but made no reply to this bold speech.

"Here are your weapons," said a red-shirted miner, elbowing his way through the crowd until he had reached the side of Ted, handing him his revolvers and belt. "They are jess as ye left 'em."

The young rough rider took the articles from the hand of the other, and quickly girthed the belt about his body. He was in the act of doing this when a prolonged shriek came from the outside of the mob, and a great hubbub instantly arose.

"Th' de'il take th' blamed brute!" cried a hoarse voice. "I can't get near the onery creetur, let erlone bringin' her in. Ef she ain't broke my ankle, I've got a clincher thet'll lame me fer a month."

The young rough rider looked up from a hasty examination of his revolver to see in the distance the dark form of Black Bess, feeding as quietly as though nothing unusual had happened.

He gave a short whistle, sharp and clear, and before its note had finished the mare threw up her head, to come down toward the crowd at the top of her speed. Upon finding that she showed no signs of slackening her headlong gait, the frightened spectators broke and fled either way with wild confusion, leaving an open path for Black Bess to sweep down to the side of her young master.

With a shrill neigh of delight, she stopped abruptly beside him, to lay her soft head against his, while her lips moved, as if she was intent upon kissing his cheek. Her bridle had slipped from her head, but the saddle remained upon her back.

"Good Bess," said Ted, stroking her fine hair, "you would not desert your master."

The noble horse whinnied her soft reply, which was unmistakably in the affirmative.

The bonds had been taken from Ted's ankles before he had been removed from the prison, and now he sprang lightly into the seat upon the back of Black Bess.

"I am ready whenever you are," he cried, looking toward the sheriff.

"I will get you a bridle for your horse," offered Mayor Lummy.

"Black Bess is easily managed without one," replied the young rough rider. "Are you ready, Capt. Nemo?"

"To the death!" gritted the other. "Fall back there, boys, but look sharp the young reprobate does not give you the slip. He is a tricky dog."

Then the young rough rider spoke what was uppermost in his mind:

"I wish to know, Mr. Sheriff, what is to become of me in case I come out first best in this duel? It is not of my seeking, and I demand my freedom in that case."

"Which is perfectly fair," said the mayor.

"Bah! That does not matter to me!" retorted the officer. "You have insulted me, and I have given this challenge that I might personally wipe out the words you have so impudently flung in my face. I ask no unfair advantage of you, and am willing to take my chances in a square stand-up fight. I am tired of this delay."

"I shall look to you, Mayor Lummy, for protection, in case I am successful in this fight," said Ted. "It is to be no boy's play."

"Clear the way for us!" cried out the sheriff. "Too much time has already been lost. I have a long ride before me."

"You will need no horse to take you there," said the young rough rider, under his breath. "Now, Bess, behave your prettiest."

In reply, the intelligent mare laid her slender ears back upon her head, and turned her soft, large eyes upon him for a moment.

The crowd was beginning to fall away, and as a path was cleared for them, the duelists rode a short distance toward the open country, where there was plenty of room for them to move.

One of the spectators stepped forward, saying:

"Youngster, you are to ride along the ridge there, while the sheriff will station hisself off to the right. You are to sit on your horses, back to each other, wheel about face at the word 'three,' as I count, and immediately begin to fire. Each man is to keep up his fire until his game falls, or his cartridges give out. Do you understand?"

"I do, even to the fact that my position will bring me directly in the range of the sun."

"Reckon th' sun ain't bad fer ye as will be th' sheriff's bullet. Git inter posish, boys."

The last sentence was spoken in a loud, authoritative tone, and Capt. Nemo, as I prefer to call him, dashed forward to the position selected for him.

If he moved with less apparent haste, the young rough rider was at his post before his rival. As he had foreseen, he was brought directly into the focus of the westering sun. However, he said nothing of this.

The bystanders, fearing that some stray shot might hit one of them, had fallen away to a considerable distance, and now stood anxiously awaiting the result.

As has been indicated, it was now past noon, a beautiful afternoon, while the sun shone upon one of the most rugged scenes to be found in the West. On one hand rose an irregular range of mountains, broken at intervals by huge rents between the massive columns, rising toward the blue dome overhead, "gigantic sentinels, discoursing to the sky."

On the other hand, at the base of this picturesque town of Skittymount lay the salt plain already described, while beyond, rising like a shadowy leviathan of the mid air stretched a long line of highlands, the southern extremity completing the idea of its being a mighty creature at repose there by having the shape and abrupt termination of a massive head, while the opposite end helped to make up this illusion by having the single ridge of mountains divided and spreading out like the tails of a pictured monster.

The town now presented a deserted appearance, only an occasional pedestrian being seen upon its long main street, with here and there some person looking out of an open door of the buildings, as if he was trying to get a view of the stirring scene being enacted upon the dueling ground.

He who seemed to have taken it upon himself to act as second in the affair, though he had really been selected sometime since by Capt. Nemo for that purpose, had stationed himself at what he considered a safe distance, and stood ready to give the signal.

"Both ready?" he called out.

"Ready?" replied Capt. Nemo.

"Ready!" responded the young rough rider, in a clear, ringing voice, which cut the air like a two-edged sword, and was heard to the furthest limits of the grounds.

As distinctly as he spoke, another clear voice suddenly rang out, following closely upon his words:

"Look sharp, Ted! The bullet has been taken from yer cartridge!"

It was Bud Morgan who spoke, and he shook his right arm excitedly as he shouted the warning.

If Ted heard him, he did not display any such knowledge.

The man who seemed to be running the duel had begun to count off the fateful numbers:

"One—two——"

"Jumpin' sandhills! He's a goner!" cried Bud, running toward the scene of the combat wildly.

A breathless silence hung over the spectators.

Capt. Nemo held a tight rein upon his nervous horse with one hand, while the other grasped tightly the deadly revolver. Those who were near enough to get a good view of his dark features saw that they were overspread with a grim smile.

Bud Morgan's startling exclamation caused him to glance anxiously in that direction, but he was quickly on his guard again.

The young rough rider sat in his seat, erect and calm, while Black Bess quivered in every limb, as she seemed to realize that something desperate was to be expected of her in a moment.

Ted's knees rested lightly against her sides.

With a slow, measured tone, the counter went on——

"Three!"

CHAPTER VII.

A WILD RIDE FOR LIFE.

The fatal word fell upon a dead silence.

And its closing sound had not died away before the young rough rider touched the right side of his faithful mare.

Had she been standing upon a pivot, she could not have turned about quicker.

The bay ridden by Capt. Nemo, less nimble, came into position a moment later, though he had started to wheel about face ahead of Ted.

In fact, he had started before the counter had half spoken the last word.

Confident that he had his contestant at odds, he moved then with more leisure than he might otherwise have done. As it was, in the flash of an eye the powerful bay was rushing toward the young rough rider.

With mighty bounds, Black Bess was leaping to meet him, Ted holding his fire until he was near enough to feel sure of his shot.

On toward each other sped the two duelists for a moment, and then, while Capt. Nemo took aim, Ted Strong pulled the trigger of his revolver, as certain of his man as if he had not been told a moment before the cartridge was empty.

Was it?

The bright flash of the powder was swiftly followed by the singing of a bullet!

And the deadly missile flew straight upon its errand of destruction.

Capt. Nemo was seen to throw his head back just as his own weapon sent forth its hurtling messenger.

His lead whistled harmlessly past Ted's ear, and kept on its way with a song of rejoicing.

At the touch of her master, Black Bess instantly became motionless.

The young rough rider did not even attempt to use another barrel of his revolver.

He knew only too well the others were empty shells, or shells from which the bullets had been extracted with a nicety that not one in a thousand would have noticed they had been tampered with.

Always on the lookout for such artifices, Ted had discovered the trick which had been played upon him as soon as the firearm had been handed to him.

Fortunately, he made it a practice to carry a reserved stock of cartridges in his boot leg.

He managed then to remove the useless shell and replace it with one that was loaded.

He did not have time to exchange others. So, preferring to hazard his chance upon this one shot than to disclose the plot which had been put up against him, he went into the duel as has been described.

Capt. Nemo sank back very slowly at first. So slowly that it seemed for a moment that he would regain his seat. But that he could not do. The revolver fell from his clutch, and he went down with increasing force until he struck the ground with a dull sound.

His horse reared, and was about to spring away, when a spectator leaped forward and caught the animal by the bit.

"Sheriff Marks is killed!" some one cried.

"'Twere a foul shot!" cried the second of the duel. "He fired before I had finished my count!"

"So he did!" agreed another.

"Shootin' wouldn't be enny too good fer him!"

Others rushed forward to the side of the fallen man, but these were forced back by four burly men, who brandished their firearms, while the counter made a hasty examination of the officer's injury.

"He's gone sure 'nough," declared the man. "Lug him up to his house."

While the four men bore the unconscious form of Capt. Nemo from the field toward the row of dwellings at the upper end of the street, he who had acted as counter began to harague the crowd relative to the shooting of the sheriff.

Ted, who had been watching the scene from his posi-

tion, realized that the words of the terse, vivid speaker carried great weight with the spectators, whom, it could be seen, had a strong friendship for the outlaw who had so shrewdly imposed upon them.

The speaker, whose name proved to be Sparks, claimed that the young rough rider had fired before Marks, which was quite true, owing to his quicker motion. But when he said Ted had done this before he had begun to count his third number, he knew he lied.

It was possible the crowd, in its excitement, did not know this.

At any rate, those who were behind the young rough rider advanced closer about him, so in a moment he was quickly surrounded.

As Ted glanced over the rough-visaged, unfriendly faces upturned to him, he comprehended his danger, still he gave no thought to retreat. He was sure that if he should escape, as he felt confident that he could, Ben Tremont would suffer the consequence. Rather than let his friend do this, he would remain a prisoner if necessary, and abide his time.

Mayor Lummy had disappeared, but for all that he felt confident that the latter would see that fair play was given him.

Thus, as the men began to come nearer with threatening movements, he cried out sternly:

"Hold where you are. If I have killed the man you call Marks, I did it in fair fight. But I do not believe he is dead, or even seriously injured. If my ears did not deceive me, my bullet struck a hard surface—a steel plate worn by your big boaster.

"But, if you will promise me fair treatment, I will surrender without resistance. What do you say?"

"Give the younker a chance!" some one cried.

"Give him all the fair play he shall want!" said another.

Sparks added his agreement to what the others said.

Without waiting for further words, the nearest of the citizens of Skittymount pushed forward to finish their capture.

"I do this only upon the condition that I am allowed fair treatment," declared Ted, as he let the man take him into custody.

He had dismounted from Black Bess, and stood beside her, when the leaders of the mob seized him with unnecessary violence, to lead him away.

A couple of the gang, seeing such a fine-looking horse standing quietly where her master just left her, stepped forward to take possession of so valuable an animal.

But the hand of the foremost was only reaching for her head, when the agile creature reared and struck at the men with such force and precision that they were sent heels over head a rod away.

Then her heels swept the scene on the opposite quarter, and half a dozen men were sent to the ground in a huddle.

Before either of the parties could rally sufficiently to stop her, the black mare sped from the scene at a furious pace, quickly getting beyond the reach of the crowd.

A dozen shots were fired at her retreating form, but she escaped them all, and a moment later was beyond danger.

"Let her go," said one. "She's an ugly brute, anyway."

The young rider smiled as he witnessed the feat of his faithful mare, but did not speak to check her flight.

So Ted Strong was taken back to his prison without any forcible resistance on his part.

As he was thrust into the small apartment, and the heavy door closed behind him, he saw the face of Ben pressed against the small aperture between the rooms.

"What, back again?" asked Ben, in surprise.

"For the time, Ben."

CHAPTER VIII.

EXCITING SCENES.

Of course, Ben was anxious to know what had happened to his friend since they had separated, and Ted related, in a few words, which was his practice when speaking of his actions, the particulars of his duel with Capt. Nemo.

"It would be a blessing to this community if you killed the reckless hound."

"I am well convinced I did not, Ben. Still, I do not think that was any fault of mine, for I took good aim. He had on a steel plate, I am sure, for I could hear the bullet when it struck. Possibly I sort of stunned him, but by this time he is up again."

"And the deep-dyed rascal had extracted every bullet from your weapons, Ted?"

"Every one; but I never take any chances in such a game. I had barely time to exchange one cartridge. You know, I always carry a reserve supply tucked away where it would be least likely to be found."

"Many a good turn has this forethought served you, too, Ted. Ah, you are a deep one. I have profited by

some of your cunning, I flatter myself. But, as long as the duel was on the square, as far as you were concerned, why have you been rearrested?"

"Some of the inhabitants of this precious town, which is about as mixed up an affair as ever I ran against, claimed I had fired before the signal."

"The man was one of Capt. Nemo's followers."

"Of course. I expect he has many of them in town. They think to make a muss of this matter until they have run you and I to earth. The mayor seems to be a likely sort of a man, and I based my dependence on him in giving myself up again. I thought it would be better than trying to get away, especially as I had got to leave you here to their mercy. I have always noticed that this running away is about the weakest thing a man can do."

"That's so. Do you suppose this infernal captain will come out to lead the rabble on?"

"No; I think his plan will be to keep in the background until we are out of the way."

"Just so. Where do you think Bud is?"

"Lying low somewhere. I'll warrant you he isn't far away."

"And that young man we managed to save from the halter?"

"Probably with Bud. That is, if he is a person with any sand in him."

"What connection do you think he had with the old man and his daughter?"

"A friend, perhaps—perhaps a stranger to them, who happened along at a most inopportune time for him.

"Hark! What means that commotion outside?"

Both of the prisoners had noticed during their conversation that there was a growing tumult around the prison pen. The heavy tread of men on sentry duty, walking back and forth, one on either side of the building, had now been drowned by the louder outcries of the crowd.

There was one window in his room of the "pen," set high up in the rough wall, and hither Ted hastened.

By thrusting his toes sharply in between the crevices in the woodwork, he managed to pull himself up so as to get a view of the surrounding scene.

It was an exciting scene upon which he gazed.

In the short interval, the inhabitants of this half-wild town had rallied about the place, some of them drawn hither by an insane desire to wreak vengeance upon this bold stranger who had shot down their leader. Others came, as men will, to become witnesses of such warlike scenes as have too often disgraced the world's history, when intelligent men, led on by those of greater brutal instincts, have committed deeds of lawlessness in the fancied belief that they were meting out the aims of justice.

Sparks was now the acknowledged leader of the mob, and he was addressing those around him with inflammable words of passion against the prisoners.

In his terse, swordlike pointedness, he told them how the young rough-rider had taken advantage of the sheriff, and shot him down in cold blood.

His words were received with wild cheers from those in sympathy with him.

But Ted Strong heard some one from the rear call out:

"Mayor Lummy promised the chaps a fair trial!"

Then another in the distance replied:

"The mayor has been shot!"

"Then it was done by one of the friends of this pair of desperadoes!" cried Sparks, boldly, prompt to take advantage of any twist in affairs that might redound to the benefit of his undertaking.

"No doubt the town is surrounded by such desperadoes!"

This startling suggestion ran over the mob like a flash of fire.

The young rough rider and his companion, for Ben had climbed to a window in his apartment and was watching the scene with intense interest, realized at once that they were in deadly peril.

"Our only safety is to finish this pair as quick as we can, and then fortify the town," declared Sparks, though how he was going to do the last he did not stop to explain.

"We must get out of this, Ted," said Ben, leaving his outlook, and returning to the little opening in the wall between them.

"Right, old fellow, and it must be done speedily, too."

"I am glad now I did what I thought might be a mistake," said Ben.

"What was that?"

"Well, while you were out fighting that one-sided duel, I began to dig down under these timbers that make this wall, when I found an ax imbedded in the dirt. No doubt it was left by some one who was a prisoner here before we came.

"At any rate, I used it to such good advantage that I have cut away the wood around the iron bars across my window, and they only hang by little shreds of wood.

You see, I was getting ready to leave this place as quickly as possible in case anything happened to you.

"Now I will pass this ax through this hole, so you can serve your fortifications in the same way."

"Good, Ben. Send along the ax. It was a wise forethought on your part."

A little later the young rough rider grasped the tool with a firm hand, believing it would prove a powerful instrument toward their escape.

Then, while the noise and confusion outside continued to increase, he began his work of cutting away the iron bars, whose ends were imbedded in the woodwork forming the frame of the window. He worked as silently as he could, not caring to let the crowd know what he was doing.

But the wood was hard, and he made slow progress in his undertaking. The height of the window, too, made it difficult for him to give a square blow.

While he was doing this, Ben kept a watch upon the movements of the mob.

"Don't spare the ax!" he cried in a little while. "They are getting ready to bring us out. Some of the hounds have brought forward a couple of mules. They have got plenty of rope—enough to halter the whole abominable gang. I would like to have hold of the end of a rope that was hitched to half of them. That sharp talker has got them fired up to white heat. How are you coming on, Ted?"

"Got one bar free; another nearly so, and the third will soon be loose."

"Good! They are starting for the door."

"Do you see anything of Black Bess?" asked the young rough rider, as the second bar fell away from its socket and dropped at his feet.

A moment later, Ben replied:

"No; she's nowhere to be seen. Here come the hotheaded fools. I have wrenched away the bars across my window, and I shall rap over the head every man who tries to enter here, let him be who he will."

The young rough rider plied his blows with renewed energy, regardless of any sound he might make.

"It may have been better if I had tried the door," he thought, as the third bar showed signs of loosening.

At that moment a furious pounding came upon the door.

"They are coming in!" cried Ben.

He had barely finished this brief announcement, when the third bar dropped at Ted's feet.

Only one remained.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Ben. "I do believe there is Bud Morgan in the distance. I should know that dancing among ten thousand."

"Bud never failed us yet," said the young rough rider, though he spoke more to himself than his companion, while he bent every purpose of his toward clearing the window.

"They don't seem to have the key to the door," cried Ben, who was kept about as busy as it was possible with watching the proceedings.

"Yes, it is Bud, and he has some one with him, but he can never get near enough to help us out of this fix. By Jove, Ted! I believe it will be our last!

"Ha! here comes a man with a key.

"Jingo! how Bud swings his hat, and jumps about. He is trying to signal to us. Ha! I read it.

"Black Bess is somewhere there, near him. So is my horse. I think he wants you to call to her."

Just then the last bar fell away from the window above the young rough rider's head.

If busy every moment, not a word from Ben had escaped his ear.

Now he caught upon the rough ledge of the window and pulled himself up, so his head appeared at the aperture.

As he did this, he gave utterance to the clear, sharp whistle with which he had called his faithful steed to him during critical occasions in the past.

As he did this, his eye swept the wild scene with a swift, comprehensive glance, discovering in the distance the active Bud Morgan and two loose horses near by.

At that moment the sharp click of a key turning in the lock came to his strained sense of hearing.

Then another sound, fraught with far more pleasure, came to both of the anxious listeners.

It was the thrice-welcome reply of the noble black steed, in response to the call of her master.

Who can describe the scene that followed that shrill neigh, human in its intonation, and the depth of its thrilling accents?

Never had Skittymount witnessed such an unexpected and exciting experience. Never will it be repeated in that rugged hamlet, where it is still talked over and commented upon.

Those upon the outside of the mob have yet a faint comprehension of hearing the clatter of hoofs shod with steel; of seeing a dark form rise beside them; of feeling

sharp blows upon their heads and bodies; of being furiously dashed aside, as if an avalanche had struck them.

Some say Black Bess rose like a meteor and sprang completely over the outside of the human wall. Striking the ground in the midst of the crowd, she kept on knocking those aside like cobwebs who were not quick enough to clear her way.

It may be so.

Certainly she mowed a wide swath from the extreme outside down to the prison wall, and she did it in so short a time that the man wresting at the door had not removed the key from its socket before he found himself confronted by the foaming, snorting, living engine of wrath and destruction.

He suddenly ceased his efforts, and retreated with the terrified rabble.

Close upon the heels of Black Bess followed the powerful horse belonging to Ben, its head lifted high in the air, while it gave vent to wild snorts of fiendish delight under the sway of mad excitement.

"Now, Ben, to horse!" shouted the young rough rider.

As he uttered the words, he raised himself to the window, and half of his body was thrust through the aperture before his speech was ended.

The next moment his agile figure dropped down upon the broad back of his black steed, that had stopped directly beneath.

Black Bess tossed her head, guiltless of a bridle, in glad recognition of her beloved master, and it did not need the slight touch of the latter's knees against her quivering sides to urge her to leave the dangerous place.

Sparks had been overturned by the wild onset of his followers as they surged back out of the pathway of the oncoming horse, but he had recovered himself by this time.

Seeing that his victim was likely to escape, he shouted:

"Don't let him get away! Shoot him as you would a dog!".

A dozen shots were fired, which endangered the spectators more in reality than they did the fugitive.

"Up and at him!" yelled the infuriated ruffian. "Shoot, every man of you! Riddle him with lead!"

This appeal was more effective than the other, inasmuch as a volley of bullets stormed the wall of the prison, some of them barely missing the young rough rider, who had pulled a pair of derringers from his boot legs and waved these over his head.

If Ted Strong had been so successful, Ben Tremont was in a tight place. A tight place in more ways than one!

It proved that he had miscalculated upon the size of the aperture, or that of his powerful body, for before he was halfway through the opening he found himself held fast and firm. Struggle as he might, he could not get through!

Among the shower of bullets sent against the wall of the building, several struck uncomfortably near to him.

One cut away a lock of his hair, and another clipped the lower part of his ear, so the blood trickled down his neck.

Looking back over the exciting scene, the young rough rider quickly saw the predicament of his friend.

Without hesitation, he wheeled Black Bess with a touch of his knee, and dashed smartly upon the scene.

Before his furious advance, the mob again fell back, in spite of the frantic cries of its maddened leader.

At that moment, too, new actors were rushing upon the scene, adding to the excitement of the babel of cries and tumult.

In the confusing outcries rang the familiar exclamation, "Jumpin' sandhills!" and over the heads of the frightened spectators streamed in the air the long, yellow hair of Bud Morgan, like the mane of a lion.

Bud held in either hand one of his formidable Colts, and twice the ringing report of those deadly weapons rang on the air.

In the path of this doughty rough rider followed a stranger, a young man with clear-cut features, and an air of victory in the light of his countenance and the movements of his body and limbs.

He, too, was mounted and armed, and together the twain rode like a whirlwind upon the ground.

"Back, Ben, and out of the door!" cried the young rough rider. "It is unlocked now. We will hold the mob at bay."

CHAPTER IX.

A RIDE FOR LIFE'S SAKE.

By this time Bud and his companion were at hand.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" cried the first. "Isn't this like old times? Come on, yer howlin' wolves, we're only too glad to meet yer: Walk right up an' take yer medicine like men. This ain't eny halfway show, but it walks right over ennything Buffler Bill undertook. How's thet for shootin'?"

Bud accompanied his words with a shot which flew

through the headgear of Sparks, and caused that redoubtable villain to jump so high in the air that if he had performed the feat an instant before he would have swallowed a bit of lead that might have finished him.

In the meantime, Ben was following the advice of the young rough rider, and was doing his level best to wriggle back out of the hole into which he climbed with such high hopes of escape. By dint of hard effort, he soon managed to break away from the jaws holding him like the jaws of a vise.

Thus, before the temporary lull in the scene had been broken by another outburst of the volcanic element ruling the mob, he dropped upon the earth floor in a heap.

Quickly rallying, knowing every moment was valuable, he reached the door and flung it open.

His appearance there was the signal for the onlookers to awaken to the situation, and another series of outcries awoke the silence of the moment, ringing far and wide over the town.

Ben's horse had not left the scene, and with an agility one might not have looked for in his stout figure, Ben Tremont swung himself into the saddle of his horse.

Picking up the reins lying upon the animal's withers, he prepared to follow in the tracks of his young leader.

Seeing there was no need of longer delay, the young rough rider spoke a single word of command to his faithful steed.

Black Bess, pricking up her ears, neighed softly in reply.

The next moment her dark form straightened, and she shot forward with the speed of an arrow sent from a huge bow.

Close upon her heels followed the powerful horse ridden by strong Ben Tremont, who had snatched a pair of derringers from his boot legs and was holding them over his head, as he turned half backward to face the crowd, as they retreated.

Behind him came Bud Morgan, mounted upon a fleet-footed gray horse he had picked up since he had parted with his friends.

In his rear rode the stranger, well mounted, and not in the least intimidated by the danger environing them.

Volley after volley from the amazed mob sped after them, and a hot pursuit was begun.

But the bullets failed to strike the targets for which they were intended, and the wild commands of Sparks failed to arouse the pursuers to the importance of their work that he felt.

The crowd parted before the wild pace of Black Bess, and Ted Strong, who really had no desire to shoot among those where he knew were many innocent lives, refrained from shooting as long as he felt he could safely do so.

Soon the stragglers of the town were passed, and, striking into the open country, the bold young rough rider breathed with renewed joy to find that the danger was over for the time. Still, he allowed his noble steed to keep on and on, though he did slacken her mad gallop to that easy lope so characteristic to her, and which enabled her to move ahead at a swift gait without any apparent effort.

Ted's companions followed close behind him, no one offering to speak, those in the rear waiting for their leader to make the first remark.

Soon after leaving Skittymount, the young rough rider found himself in the valley of a small mountain stream running toward the east of the town.

Crossing this narrow stream, he soon began to climb one of the first of the series of benches of the country that led to the ridge of highlands overlooking the plains.

The sure-footed Black Bess ascended this broken way with easy pace, and when, a minute later, she reached the level path leading along in a parallel course to the valley, she continued her journey with evident delight.

Under the shadows of a clump of trees growing above the fringe skirting the descent at their feet, the young rough rider drew rein.

From the holster of his saddle he had before this taken a pair of Colts, to replace those still in the hands of Sparks and his confederates, a smile lighting his countenance as he held the trusty weapons in his grip.

"Seems good to be armed like a man again," he remarked to Ben, who reined up beside him.

"These derringers are all right in case of an emergency, and I am not going to scoff at them, after the service they have done me. But in the work ahead I prefer to have them out of sight, and something more deadly in hand.

"How do you feel, Ben?"

"A little sore around the ribs, where I got punctured by that narrow opening they called a window. What in the name of humanity they want to build such a little opening that disgraces the name of window."

"Or a hulky body, that was never intended to crawl through the needle's eye," said the young rough rider, laughingly.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" ejaculated Bud Morgan, joining

his companions. "I never see sich an up an' down beast as this. 'Tain't much like the leetle hoss I rid over the salt plain on. Poor creetur! 'twere too much fer it."

"You seem as chipper as ever, Bud," greeted Ted.

"Great roarin' bufflers!" he began, but it does me good to see yer two safe and sound ag'in. Onc't I give in thet yer was a-goners."

"Where have you kept yourself, Bud?"

"Hangin' round, to be handy when I was wanted. Reckon I weren't fur behind the lighter."

"No, Bud; I can always count on you. Who is this you have with you?" indicating the young man, who now overtook the others, and halted in front of them.

"The same chap we found in the halter. I pulled him away, when the crowd was busy introducin' itself to you 'uns. He seems like a respectful sort of a chap, and I'm not very much ashamed to train with him. He's got a leetle yarn to spin, when yer feel like hearin' it."

"Does it concern the old man and his daughter, who were so foully dealt with this morning?"

"It does, sir," replied the young man, addressing the young rough rider. "My name is Sumner Burroughs, and the gentleman killed by that red-handed sheriff was John Jameson, the father of my affianced wife, Gertrude Jameson.

"They were on their way to Skittymount, where I was to meet them. Getting impatient over their coming, I went out this morning to meet them, only to find Mr. Jameson lying on the ground dead, and his daughter no where to be found.

"While I was bending over him, trying to find out if there was not some life left in his body, that sheriff rode up and arrested me for killing the last man on earth I would harm.

"Of course, I tried to prove my innocence of the crime, but I was among comparative strangers, and nothing I could say had any weight against what the officer said. The result was they dragged me under that tree, and but for your opportune arrival and interference I should have been put to death. It was a terrible ordeal.

"But what could have become of Gertrude? Mr. Morgan here has told me how you all witnessed the killing far off, and that you saw her taken away by some horsemen."

"We did," replied the young rough rider.

"It was to go in her quest that I steered in this direction, when we might have escaped more easily by going to the south."

"Then you are willing to try and help me save her?" asked Burroughs, eagerly.

"We are always ready to lend a helping hand where it is needed. So you have no clew in regard to her fate?"

"Not so much as you know. I believe that officer to be a villain of the darkest kind."

"You are not far from right," said Ted Strong, with a smile.

"Mr. Morgan has told me who you are, Mr. Rough Rider, and I wish to say that I have heard you spoken of in the highest terms. I——"

"Thanks!" broke in the young rough rider, modestly; "let us talk business. There is a subject quite as interesting," pointing toward the valley at their feet, as he spoke.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE FOE.

The companions of the young rough rider were surprised to discover the forms of a body of horsemen coming up the valley at a swinging pace.

There were at least half a dozen in the squad, and it could be seen that the leader was following a gait that puzzled his followers to maintain.

"My hat against a pin," said Ted Strong, "that the foremost rider is Capt. Nemo."

"Your most bitter foe," said Ben Tremont, bending a closer gaze upon the approaching rider.

"Jumpin' sandhills! Ted's always right," declared Bud, beginning to unsling a firearm from his back.

Handing this to his leader, he said:

"Mebbe ye'll need it by-'m-by."

The heart of the young rough rider beat with uncommon fervor, as he was thus unceremoniously presented with his own rifle, which had been taken from him at Skittymount, and which he had never expected to see again.

"I picked it up for you," declared Bud, simply, without entering into the account of a fierce struggle and a risky adventure he had been through in order to recover the prized weapon.

"You are a whole team, and a horse to boot," said the young rough rider, gladly accepting the rifle and slinging it across his back, while he held his revolvers in readiness for use.

During this brief dialogue he had not allowed his gaze to leave the approaching horsemen, who were now within plain view, and sweeping ahead at a rattling pace.

"They evidently have no idea that we are in this vicinity," said Ted.

"It is Capt. Nemo. Do you suppose he is going to his mountain den?" asked Ben.

"That would be a natural conclusion. It is fortunate we took the upper bench. I could see the other was more traveled."

Then, in silence, the four watched the approach of the outlaws, for such they were beyond doubt. Capt. Nemo, finding his ruse had not worked, had rallied suddenly, and, taking with him half a dozen of his most trusty followers, had ridden out of town upon the claim that they were going in search of the escaped strangers.

Nearer and nearer came the party, until they were riding directly below our friends, who continued their watch faithfully.

"How easily we could pick them off," said Ben, beginning to finger his weapons significantly.

"Better let them go their way now," answered Ted. "The hour of reckoning is not far distant. They seem to be steering directly toward the base of the lower mountains.

"I do not believe we can do any better than to keep along on this ridge, near enough to see where they mean to stop."

Without waiting longer, the young rough rider moved ahead, Black Bess picking her way with a care which seemed to denote that even she realized the need of caution to be taken in their advance.

Ted Strong's companions followed in his footsteps, though it was not possible for them to move with the extreme caution which marked his course.

Still, the distance down to the lower trail followed by Capt. Nemo was too great to give cause for any alarm over their presence being discovered from the sound of their advance. The danger lay rather in the fact that at intervals, where the hedge of small growth was broken away, or had found too scanty sustenance to grow to any height, they were likely to be seen.

Even this became largely removed from the fact that the outlaws moved with so much more haste that they were soon half a mile ahead of the four following in their course.

"It looks to me as if it were going to be a long road," declared the young rough rider. "In that case, it stands us in hand to keep them in sight, though their trail may be easy to follow."

"What harm would follow if we should get down to their path?" asked Ben. "This way is growing more and more difficult."

"I have been thinking as you do. We will watch our chances, but I do not believe there is any haste in making the change."

Without further conversation, the little party moved cautiously forward, with what speed they could, though it soon became apparent that they must lose sight of their object.

This did not disconcert the young rough rider, who had allowed Black Bess to take her own gait in picking her way onward. But the faithful mare could not have moved with greater speed, under the condition of the route, had she been urged to her utmost. So the others often found it difficult to keep up, and twice Ted felt obliged to stop, in order that they might come up with him.

In this manner was the journey continued, while the afternoon waxed and waned, until long shadows were thrown by the high mountains, and twilight settled upon the plains.

An hour before sunset the young rough rider, finding a suitable place, descended to the smoother and wider trail, which had been followed by Capt. Nemo and his band.

"I am afraid we have missed them," said Sumner Burroughs, in his impatience, feeling an unrest he could not shake off, lest they should reach their destination too late to accomplish the purpose upon which they were bent.

"Capt. Nemo's haunts must lie beyond here," replied Ted. "It is my opinion we shall not have to ride as far as we have come to reach it, however."

"God grant we shall not," murmured young Burroughs.

For another hour the four continued their ride, the mountains now drawing nearer to them, so that the valley presented the shape of a huge letter V laid upon the landscape in an inverted position.

The stars were now thickly jeweling the sky, while there was the shimmer of light breaking over the mountain tops, which is the forerunner of the moon.

But it was too dark to see anything distinctly, and the black steed, ridden by their young leader, looked to the others like a moving shadow, leading them on into some unknown fate.

Then this shadow stopped very suddenly, and it sniffed the air in a low but significant manner.

Wondering what it meant, the others pushed forward beside the form of the young rough rider.

"There is an ambush laid just above here," he whispered.

"For us?" asked Burroughs.

"It will be for us, if we run into it," replied Ted Strong. "Black Bess scented the fellows, or I might have been caught off my base."

"It is probable then we are near the rendezvous of the outlaws," declared Ben.

"No doubt of it. Now I am going to leave Bess with you, while I do a little reconnoitering."

Slipping from the saddle, Ted lost no time in carrying out his intentions, while his companions remained perfectly motionless, to await his return.

The young rough rider had not gone far before he found that he was coming to a broken place in the valley, where the rocks were covered with a stunted growth, the whole scene as dark as it could be without a moon. Used to such adventures as this during his experiences in the Philippines and Cuba, the young rough rider, carrying his weapons in hand, crept silently forward past rock and bush, and across gullies, until he judged he was near the spot where the outlaws were lurking, if he had not been mistaken in expecting them.

Creeping now upon his hands and knees, he slowly approached the densest of the retreat, to stop in a moment at the sound of a human voice, saying:

"D'ye hear enny o' 'em comin', Mike?"

"Nary a click o' the nail. Mebbe they've turned back."

"That would not be the young rough rider. No, they'll be 'long soon 'nough."

"I hope they won't keep us waiting much longer. I'm hungry's a b'ar."

"Better stop yer yop, or ye'll git a supper o' lead from the dogs we're waitin' fer. The young rough riders hev ears that can hear a mile away, I've been tol'," spoke up another.

"Bah! Don't ye think, Gus Skinner, we kin hear their hoofbeats afore they git near 'nough to find us? Oh! the young rough rider is goin' to git ketched like a b'ar atween th' jaws o' a steel trap, when he bucks up against Capt. Nemo."

"Mebbe so. But it looked blamed foolish to me fer him to send thet gal up hyur. An' why ain't he hyur to lead us?"

"Courtin' the smile o' thet gal, I s'pose. She's harmsome as a picter. 'Twas lucky the cap'n diskivered the ripscallions as he come erlong."

"Well, I wish we were out'n this job, fair and square."

"Shet yer jaw, Jake. Ain't ye got enny sand. 'Member thet time on the Divide——"

"Silence, every man of you!" ordered a voice in the distance. "I believe they are coming."

The young rough rider felt that it was time for him to return to his companions, though in doing so he made a detour, to find that it was possible for them to go around the ambuscade, so as not to give any suspicion to the others of their presence.

Ted found his friends anxiously awaiting him, and when he told what he had learned they unanimously agreed to follow him around the outlaws, lying in ambush.

All dismounting now, the men led their animals slowly forward upon this dangerous way, where they knew they were liable to be beset by the followers of Captain Nemo at any moment.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TIGER IN HIS LAIR.

Five, ten minutes were consumed in this perilous advance, during which time the young rough rider had not spoken a word, nor any mishap occurred to check their onward movements.

Ted had calculated so well on the distance to go that they had not discovered any signs of the presence of an enemy. Under cover of the forest, where it was too dark to see any distance, their greatest danger had been from arousing their foes from some noise or disturbance they were likely to make. Fortunately for their object, the forest was clear of undergrowth, and the surface comparatively smooth.

Now the young rough rider halted, standing by the side of Black Bess, while he tried to pierce the shadows ahead.

"I think there is a clearing a short distance up the valley," he whispered to Ben, who paused close to him.

"Seems to me I catch the reflection of moonlight through the lower branches of the trees," said the latter.

"Come on," ordered Ted, resuming his advance, his companions losing no time in imitating his example.

In less than five minutes more the young rough rider again halted, and this time he stood under the edge of the forest, with a good-sized opening ahead.

The scene he looked out upon, while his friends stood beside him in deep wonder, was one calculated to bring an expression of surprise, if no stronger emotion, from the unguarded onlooker.

It was nothing less than a collection of rude dwellings, looking more like border blockhouses than common houses, grouped here in this hidden retreat.

Near the center of this odd collection of buildings making up a little hamlet under the mountain was one larger than the others, and more pretentious, being of two stories and having glass windows.

In the doorway of this abode stood the figure of a tall, clean-shaven man, a long rifle by his side, while he seemed to be occupied in watching and listening for some one.

The muscles upon the beardless face of the young rough rider contracted slightly, as he whispered in a low tone to his companions:

"Capt. Nemo!"

"Do you suppose that this is his rendezvous?" asked Ben Tremont.

"Looks like it," replied Ted. "It is a strongly built house, and those other buildings look as if they might prove strong defenses in case of an attack.

"My faith, but the place is well hemmed in, and an ideal spot for such purposes as his."

"I think this is Glimmerton, of which I have heard mention," said Burroughs. "Can it be possible that Gertrude is in this infamous den?"

"We shall soon know," said Ted. "I think just now Mr. Nemo is looking for some sign of the work of his men. See how anxious he looks. It's too bad to disappoint him of his sport. Perhaps it isn't the first time he has been disappointed."

A deathlike stillness hung over the isolated village, though glimmering lights twinkled like stars from the different buildings, telling that they were occupied.

"What next?" asked Bud Morgan, who was fingering nervously the stock of his firearm, while he gazed alternately upon the stalwart figure of the outlaw in the open door.

"I think we will leave the horses just back of here, under the care of Burroughs, while the rest of us reconnoiter a little, so as to get a better understanding of the situation. I think Nemo must have quite a force here, according to appearances."

No sooner had the young rough rider given his directions than he began to move into the deeper forest, followed, as before, by his companions, who had explicit faith to think that he would carry out the most feasible plan possible.

Not one of the quartet stopped to consider the odds against which they were pitting themselves, should it prove that the girl was a captive among them.

This maneuver required half an hour's time, as it had to be done with extreme caution. But a spot to suit the young rough rider was finally found, where the horses were left in deep seclusion near the bank of the mountain river. A thick hedge of undergrowth skirted three sides, the fourth flanked by the steep bank of the gorge, at the bed of which flowed the torrent in uproarious glee.

The young rough rider reasoned that by this time the party in ambush must have returned, and that the outlaws would think they had failed to find their way so far up the valley.

"No doubt they will keep a sharp lookout, but they will be less cautious here in their stronghold," declared Ted. "But that does not warrant us in relaxing our vigilance.

"Remember, boys, we are about to enter the lair of the tiger himself—the worst desperado in these parts, if half they tell of him is true, and he has not lost some of his fierceness since last I met him.

"Let us separate here. Ben, you follow closer down to the river. Bud, you keep in the deeper forest above here. I will take the center line of advance, and we will meet somewhere near the big house of the captain of this infamous band."

The companions of the young rough rider lost no time in starting upon their respective routes, leaving him to advance stealthily toward the center of the small town, if the collection of half a dozen houses deserves such a name.

Before he had gone far, Ted Strong heard the steady tread of a person moving slowly back and forth, like a sentinel on duty.

Dropping silently upon his knees and hands, he crept along under the shadow of a low-walled building running out from the upper end of the main house, until he could hear the measured footsteps very distinctly.

The man was marching slowly to and fro in the rear of the dwelling, from which came the sound of many voices blending in some noisy demonstration.

Once the young rough rider was sure he heard a woman's voice, in a tone of supplication.

He immediately became anxious to get within the building, in order to accomplish the purpose in his mind.

While he lay there in the darkness, the tall, broad-shouldered figure of the sentry loomed above him close at hand, as the man moved somewhat outside of his regular beat.

The most conspicuous feature about him was an old army coat, with cape, that he wore, while his head was covered with a black, slouched hat.

A minute later, as he stepped forward into better light, while he seemed to be looking hungrily in the direction of the building, Ted saw that, even if he wore a coat more than a third of a century old, he was a young man, his chin and cheeks covered with a prodigious growth of tawny beard.

"Confounded strange," he muttered, "that Billy don't come. I'm 's hungry as a bear. I s'pose the rest are feasting great."

While the speaker was giving expression to his discontent, the young rough rider formulated his plan of action. This was nothing less than the bold project of overpowering the man, adopting his rôle, and when the relief should come, go into the house in his disguise. To assist him in this purpose, he had in his pocket a set of false whiskers, which he believed would pass in the night. The old army coat, which no doubt the sentinel had at some time taken from some old veteran of the Civil War, put on over his suit, would complete his outfit.

With this purpose in mind, the young rough rider waited for the outlaw to turn his back, when he crept close down to the place where he had stood a moment before.

There the young scout lay in readiness for his victim as soon as he should return from the lower end of his beat.

It was not more than three or four minutes before the man in the faded coat of blue came slowly back to his former position, unconscious of the figure crouching in the shadows ready to spring upon him the instant his back should be turned.

"Billy must come soon," he declared, under his breath, and then, as if to feast with hungry eyes upon the imaginary scene within the house, he wheeled about with the precision of an old soldier.

This was the opportunity of the young rough rider, who sprang swiftly forward with the agility of a cat, and the next moment had borne the startled sentinel to the ground.

Before he could give an outcry Ted's hand closed over his mouth.

"Not a word or a move if you value your life!" hissed the young captor in the ear of his prisoner. "I shall not harm you if you offer no resistance, though I may have to handle you a little rough."

The man seemed to understand, for he gave no further resistance, while Ted began to consider some means by which he could secure his victim.

In this respect he was extremely fortunate, as the prisoner himself was provided with the very instrument desired.

Upon having him remove the army coat, the young rough rider found a stout cord in one of the pockets, which the outlaw carried for this purpose, though he had expected to be the captor rather than the captive.

With this Ted speedily bound him hands and feet. Then he fastened his handkerchief over his mouth to be sure he would not give an outcry.

He had barely accomplished this work, when he heard some one approaching, whom he rightfully judged to be the relief expected by his prisoner.

Hastily drawing on the old army coat over his khaki suit, and replacing his sombrero with the slouched hat worn by the outlaw, he took up his long, heavy gun and began to pace back and forth.

He had also been careful to drag his victim back into the shadows out of sight of any chance passer-by.

"Hello, Dalton!" greeted the newcomer, as he approached, "get tired of waiting for me. Deuced great time in the hall, and I was durned loath to leave, I will 'low. But your turn has come."

Muttering over an inaudible speech, the young rough rider quickly accepted the liberty given him, and without further ado stalked slowly in the course from whence the other had come.

Soon coming to the doorway, the door being slightly ajar, he stopped to look within the building.

He found that the whole interior of the structure on the ground floor seemed to be in one great room, that designated by the outlaw he had just left as "the hall."

CHAPTER XII.

A HARD CROWD.

The young rough rider quickly counted twenty men seated along the sides of a rough table piled with coarse viands, mainly the products of some recent hunt.

At the head of the crowd sat the evil genius, Capt. Nemo, looking more fiendish than ever before.

Taken from him to his most decent looking follower, it was a hard crowd, not a man of whom would hesitate to cut a throat or betray a friend if personal safety demanded it.

The room was poorly furnished, there being only a few plain stools, which were occupied now by the men lined along the table.

Not far from the outlaw chief was one empty, while near the foot of the row were two or three others still empty.

Without caring to be brought into too close proximity to Capt. Nemo at the outset, the young rough rider was about to enter and go to one of the chairs at the foot of the table, when he was surprised to see a big, hulking fellow come stumbling in, to drop lazily into one of them.

Though carefully disguised, Ted was not long in recognizing in this newcomer his stanch friend, Ben Tremont!

Scarcely had the true-hearted Ben become seated before another entered, reeling from side to side as he reached another empty seat, and sank into it with a muttered exclamation of satisfaction.

Small of figure, but compactly built, his disguise did not conceal his identity from Ted.

He was Bud Morgan.

"The boys never fail to be on hand, though this is an unexpected treat," thought the young rough rider.

With these reflections Ted strode carelessly into the hall, and dropped upon the empty stool standing not far from Capt. Nemo.

"Just in season, Dalton," commented the latter, with a nod toward him.

"Now, Jones and Pluffer, bring in the queen of this feast, and the exercises shall not be delayed longer. I am as hungry as a beaver, and I know the rest of you must have good appetites by this time."

At his command a couple of the men near the lower end of the table left the hall, ostensibly on the errand commanded by their leader.

The young rough rider noticed that the chief was frequently looking toward the opposite door, and he was beginning to speculate upon the meaning, when one of the gang shambled into the room.

"Any news, Holt?" demanded Nemo.

"Nope."

"Any sign of the young rough rider and his companions?"

"Nope."

"Mighty queer where they could have gone. Has Stanyan and his men gone to look after them?"

"Yep."

"And Steelyard is on guard at the ambush?"

"Yep."

"Well, I don't know as we need to let the young reprobate spoil our supper by his absence. We'll find him sure to-morrow. Ha! here comes the houri."

The young rough rider only did what the others did when he glanced toward the lower end of the hall.

Jones and Pluffer were returning, bearing between them a young woman of surpassing beauty, whom Ted instantly recognized as Gertrude Jameson. She showed that she had been weeping, and now the two men had to almost entirely bear her weight, as she came with unwillingness into the midst of this motley company.

At sight of her Capt. Nemo cried out:

"Brace up there, hussy. This is no time for tears. See! the feast is spread, and you are an honored guest. Here, take a seat at my right, and cursed be the man who dares to lay a finger on you! Come, dry those eyes, for we want no whimpering kittens here."

Jones and Pluffer led her forward to the seat designated, and then returned to their former positions.

Capt. Nemo then seized one of the black bottles, of which there were several on the table. Knocking the cork from its long neck, he drained long and deep of the fiery contents. His men lost no time in following his example, and it is safe to say more than one thirsty throat was made glad.

Of course the young rough rider and his disguised companions had to do as the outlaws did in appearance, though they were careful none of the vile stuff passed down their throats.

"Now lay to, my hearties, and eat," commanded Capt. Nemo. "Let them say what they may over to Skittymount of us, they can't deny that we are good feeders.

"Fire and furies! I wonder how they are getting along without me. Then they must miss the genial mayor, poor fool! Tom fixed him at one lick, though I'm afraid the shot weren't the kind that kills. That's what I told Tom to deal out to him. At any rate, it answered a purpose for the time being. Just as soon as I get hold of the blamed young rough rider I'll be back among them in higher standing than ever. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good."

Capt. Nemo's followers were already busy devouring the food, our three rough riders finding this an easier task than drinking the black liquor, for neither of them had tasted food for twenty-four hours.

But if the men could eat of the coarse viands, the beautiful captive, seated beside her captor, could not touch a morsel.

Finally Capt. Nemo discovered this fact, and with a look of rage upon his features, he shouted, using an oath not fit to be given here:

"What are you sitting in idleness for?"

"I cannot eat, sir. Oh, take me back to the side of my poor, murdered father. I——"

"Who talks of murdered fathers here?" demanded the outlaw leader. "I tell you to eat. That's what we are here for, not to bury carrion."

"Sir——"

"Stop right where you are, miss. I want you to know that I am master here, and I allow no man to brook my word, let alone a woman."

"I cannot eat——"

"Can't eat, eh? I'll learn you how, if you never learned," and catching up a handful of the meat Capt. Nemo leaned over, to seize her about the body with his strong right arm, while he prepared to fill her mouth with the food.

"Spare me—help!" shrieked the unfortunate woman, struggling to break away from his hold.

A wild, uproarious laugh came from the amused spectators, who stopped their eating to enjoy the "fun."

The young rough rider had witnessed all he could in silence, and though his action was going to precipitate a crisis a little sooner than he had intended, it would not matter much.

Springing to his feet he cried:

"Unhand that girl, captain!"

But Capt. Nemo paid no heed to this bold interference, and he renewed his attempt to thrust the food into the captive's mouth.

Without further delay Ted Strong leaped forward, and with a well-directed blow felled Capt. Nemo to the floor. Then wheeling smartly about, displaying a Colts revolver in either hand, he thundered:

"The first man who lifts a finger falls in his tracks. Up and at work, boys!"

In a moment Ben and Bud were on their feet, both armed like their young leader, the latter crying:

"Jumpin' sandhills! this looks like bizness. Hi, there! Mister Coon, don't git yer head so high 's to be in the way o' my bullets. I claim the hull upper half of this hall."

One of the outlaws had attempted to gain his feet, but the shot from Bud made him change his mind, so he lay down upon the floor.

The young rough rider was already retreating toward the door, and his companions, fairly brushing aside the outlaws like so many flies, covered his retreat.

Ted bore in his strong left arm the amazed and bewildered young woman, while with the other he continued to threaten his enemies.

So quickly was this daring maneuver performed, that

Capt. Nemo had not regained his feet before the young rough rider was out of the building, and Ben and Bud close behind him.

"Up and after them!" yelled Capt. Nemo. "It is the young rough rider and his hell hounds. Shoot them."

A volley of shots was fired, but the brave trio and their fair charge were beyond their range.

In the midst of his flight Ted ran up against the sentry, who first challenged him, and then brought his rifle to bear upon him. So close was the outlaw upon them that it seemed certain either the girl or her rescuer must fall.

But Ted was too quick for the man.

Clubbing his own weapon he sent the other reeling to the earth, where he was likly to lie for a good spell, though he was not killed.

"They are upon our heels!" panted Ben, reaching the side of the young rough rider at this moment.

"Back into the deeper forest," said Ted. "Faster, miss, if you want to get away from that crowd. We are your friends, and Sumner Burroughs is waiting for you only a short distance yonder."

The brave girl rallied, but finding that she could not keep up with them, Ben lifted her bodily in his powerful arms, and strode off through the growth with rapid strides, as if she had been a child.

This left the young rough rider and Bud to cover his retreat.

Ted could have asked for nothing more to his liking.

For the next five minutes lively times took place under the shadows of that old forest.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER AT BAY.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" cried Bud, who was in his element, as he crouched in the shadows of a stunted pine and waited the appearance of an enemy. "Let me get a bead on one of the tarnal ripscallions. Hyur comes er galoot. Now, one —"

The rest was drowned by the report of his rifle, and followed by the yell of pain from the outlaw as he sank upon the threshold.

The young rough rider was watching for his bitterest foe, Capt. Nemo, who proved prudent enough to remain in the background, very much to the chagrin of Ted.

So hot a fire did our twain keep up that the outlaws failed to get through the door out into the open air where the sharpshooters lay in wait for them.

But if Ted and Bud held them at bay in this quarter, others swarmed out from the opposite side of the building, and it was not long before they came pell-mell toward the rough riders.

Confident that Ben had reached the rendezvous by this time, Ted told Bud to retreat with him, and a few minutes later they had passed beyond the reach of their enemies, though the deep, stentorian voice of Capt. Nemo could be heard urging them on to renewed battle.

"The big bully and coward!" muttered the young rough rider, "you are careful to keep your precious body out of sight. They are going down toward the bank of the river," said Ted. "Looks as if they had mistaken our course."

"I wanted to get one more bead," affirmed Bud. "But I s'pose I can afford to wait."

"So you can, Bud, after the good work we have done. Here we are close upon Ben and Burroughs."

A minute later they had indeed joined the others, who greeted their appearance with great joy.

The young woman, now that she had passed through the ordeal, had fainted in the arms of her lover, who was trying to restore her to consciousness.

"Let her lie down upon the ground," said Ted. "She will soon revive. It has been a hard ordeal for her."

"Do you think we are safe from them now?" asked Burroughs, anxiously.

"Not safe while Capt. Nemo lives. But we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have our liberty, and one free man is worth more than a dozen in bondage."

"I think Gertrude is recovering her consciousness," said young Burroughs, joyfully. "See! she opens her eyes; she moves!"

Miss Jameson was indeed reviving, and a few minutes later she was talking with her lover and new-found friends freely.

"I can never forget that blow dealt poor father," she exclaimed. "Oh, that bad, cruel man, how I hate him!"

"You knew him before you and your father came West?" asked the young rough rider.

"Oh, yes; I knew him in our home near St. Louis, after we had come on from New York. He wanted me to marry him, but I refused him. I fairly loathed him then, and now I hate him.

"A few days ago, while in a small town twenty miles to the east of here, I was startled to meet him. He spoke civilly enough, and asked us where we were going. Before I could check father he had told him our plans, so he knew we were expecting to reach Skittymount at the time we intended this morning.

"I can see now that he was planning that attack upon us for the double purpose of robbing father, and of carrying me off here. Alas! he succeeded only too well."

"Only too well!" echoed Sumner Burroughs. "But you have me with you, darling, and I will see that no further harm befalls you. If I had only been a few minutes earlier this morning I might have saved all."

"Or fallen a victim yourself, for you know this terrible Nemo had three others to help him."

"Let us not talk of that, dearest, but place our trust in these brave men, who I have no doubt will help us out of this trouble."

The young rough rider decided that it would be best for them to remain in their concealment until the outlaws should become more quiet again.

"I am quite sure they will not find us here. If they do we will show them the mettle of our arms. Lest we shall be taken unawares, I am going to look about a bit. Do not be alarmed if I am gone some time. In case I stumble upon danger I will signal to you with the cry of the cat."

Without saying any more Ted Strong, having cast aside the old army coat as of no further use to him at present, and put the false beard away in one of his pockets for another possible use in the future, started out upon his perilous mission.

"You had better catch a nap, Bud," said Ben, as soon as their young leader had left them. "I will take my turn by and by. I tell you no man can keep up forever without sleep."

Without objecting Bud lay down upon the earth, and inside of three minutes was sound asleep.

Sumner Burroughs begged of Gertrude to try and sleep, but she declared nothing was further from her. She could not sleep. So, with the arm of her lover about her, while he whispered in a low tone such words of comfort and love as he felt, she in a measure forgot her situation and replied in the same cautious tone.

In this manner, the silence of the night broken only by the voices of nature, the little party watched and waited for the return of their leader.

He was so long in coming that Bud awoke, and Ben took his turn at napping.

Sumner Burroughs and his sweetheart grew nervous over the long absence of the young rough rider, and wanted to leave the place, to see if they could not find their way to safety.

But Bud Morgan, who was then doing sentry duty, only shook his head.

"Ted ain't in a place of trouble, or we'd heard his whistle. He'll be back in time."

Bud proved a true prophet, if a rude one, for just as the day was breaking the catlike steps of their youthful leader fell on the acute ears of Bud, and the next moment his khaki uniform was plainly seen in the growing light of early morning.

"At last the outlaws have lain down to rest, and some of them are already asleep, partly from the effects of their prolonged exertions, but more from their heavy drinking.

So it is time for us to be moving. I have discovered a road leading away from the east of the rendezvous, which I judge leads out of the mountains to some civilized place. It crosses the canyon a short distance away, where we shall be obliged to move in single file, and with great caution. Beyond I judge there will be no difficulty."

Ben was now awake, and the men prepared at once to begin their flight.

It was decided, as there were not horses enough for all, that Gertrude should ride with Burroughs, thus leaving the rough riders each with a horse.

This was deemed the wisest, as they would be obliged to cover the flight of the lovers, who would have only to look after themselves.

The young rough rider was to lead the way, with

Burroughs and his companion going next. Behind them Ben and Bud were to follow.

This was to be the plan until they had succeeded in clearing the outlaws here. But as soon as the river was crossed it was intended that the three rough riders should go ahead, as Ted feared the attack of a party of outlaws that he knew was abroad somewhere in that direction.

Slowly and cautiously the little band of riders moved through the growth, keeping a good distance away from the hamlet of robbers, but so shaping their course that they would come out near the narrow bridge spanning the turbid mountain stream.

So carefully did they carry out this portion of their plan, that the bridge was reached just as the clear light of day began to flood the valley.

"Hark!" whispered the young rough rider, "they are coming! Something has alarmed them.

"Keep on across the river, and ride straight up the road."

The bridge was made of logs that were supported by stout chains, the whole a shaky affair and barely wide enough for a sure-footed horse to follow.

More than fifty feet below tossed and foamed and roared the turbid river, its bed filled with huge bowlders, and its banks riven with seams and fissures.

Altogether it was a wild spot, and a timid rider would be pretty sure to grow dizzy did he stop to look down.

"Come on!" shouted Ted, as the cries of the outlaws rang louder and louder.

Gallant Black Bess caught the wild spirit of the occasion, and her nostrils expanded and tail streaming in the air, she bounded down toward the swinging, narrow structure spanning the deep gorge.

Before the young rough rider was halfway across the swinging bridge, Capt. Nemo and two followers rode down on the opposite side!

Black Bess stopped suddenly in the midst of the passage, and Ted was off her back, and had leveled his rifle in an instant.

It was a moment and a situation the fugitives would never forget.

With the enemies rushing down upon them from the rear, and their way blocked at this narrow, dangerous crossing by Capt. Nemo himself, they truly seemed lost.

But Ted Strong, the brave young rough rider, never flinched.

As his most bitter enemy, calling to his confederates to press down from the other side, drew his revolver to cover him, the young rough rider took quick aim with his rifle, held over the back of his black mare, and fired.

Capt. Nemo reeled back in his seat. Then, rallying somewhat, he fell forward with his arms hanging down beside the neck of his horse.

This animal, seeing the path stopped ahead, wheeled with a snort of terror, and bounded up the road from whence it had just been driven, carrying the unconscious form of its master upon its back.

"Follow me!" cried Ted, exultingly, springing into the saddle and spurring Black Bess forward, so she cleared the bridge at another bound.

Before the amazed companions of Capt. Nemo could recover their terror enough to defend themselves, the young rough rider sent two shots into them, and then sped up the road at a furious pace, looking back as he did so to see if his friends were following him.

Sumner Burroughs, so quickly had the young rough rider dismounted and regained his seat, had barely slackened the gait of his horse, and now rode boldly over the bridge, feeling the arms of the brave girl instinctively close smartly about him as they rode over the rough flooring.

But they were soon safely over, and Ben and Bud, after firing a few shots into the ranks of the outlaws in pursuit, followed upon their heels.

Disconcerted by the fate of their leader, the outlaws at the rendezvous did not give any very energetic pursuit.

In fact, as far as the fugitives knew, they did not follow at all.

Thus, two hours later, the little party rode into the town of Wiseacre with a feeling of safety.

The young rough rider was disappointed in not finding any trace of Capt. Nemo, whether living or dead. Though he had urged Black Bess on as fast as he dared, he did not think it prudent to outride his companions, and so the big bay ridden by the outlaw escaped him. If Capt. Nemo lived or not, it was certain his vengeance had been averted for a time, and Sumner Burroughs and Miss Gertrude Jameson, finding a justice at Wiseacre, were married, and left their friends the next day with considerable reluctance.

THE END.

Next week's issue (52) will contain "The Young Rough Rider's Great Play; or, The Mad Ally of a Villain." In it you will learn how the young rough riders encountered a band known as the Mojave Terrors, and what came of it.

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The young rough rider's bitterest foe, or, The challenge of Captain Nemo

Edward C. Taylor

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